The Significance of the Mind-Changing Drugs

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I

We live in a world which is increasingly dependent upon mechanisms. Although we are no longer naive enough to believe that matter is the only reality, or that nature is just a vast machine aggregated from bits and pieces, we are far from free of the taint of materialism. We recoil from the social consequences which follow overemphasis on things (what Buber has called the It-culture), and look about us somewhat frantically for ways to re-establish a sense of the meaning and value of the human condition. Still, we find it very difficult to disentangle our thought from a system of belief which for so many years was upheld by the authority of scientific scholarship. We have sense enough to realize that the best instrument for social change is education. But for most of us education is still the acquisition of facts, rather than wisdom, and so the transformation of learning is primarily in the direction of programmed teaching, via machines and other sophisticated devices. One wonders, however, whether even the magnificent goal of a computer for every child would insure that child's ability to discriminate the false from the real, to distill meaning from his experience, or to realize his own self.

The explosion of knowledge which distinguishes these decades has one fortunate aspect.

In an era of space-walking and planetary probes, nothing is too strange or fanciful for scientific study. Thus many long-neglected issues have been reopened. In fact, many scientists today will admit that the really great questions lie in areas which were once stigmatized as "metaphysical"—yet the means they are using to attack these problems rely to a great extent on techniques which have been developed in the physical sciences. Biochemistry has successfully opened up new understanding of the fundamental constituents of living organisms and is pursuing the mystery of life deep into the realm of the so-called non-living. It may soon become evident that organization is coexistent with matter everywhere. Yet knowledge of the physical and chemical processes in living creatures and even in the atom does not allow us to specify life itself, nor does it deliver an explanation of consciousness as the universal concomitant of life. What the investigation *is* beginning to indicate, however, is that life will continue to be an intangible—a quality, not a thing.

It has been said that nothing you or I ever do will be incompatible with the nucleic acids and proteins within us. It is proper that we should understand the nature and requirements of these bodily constituents, since they must be to some extent ours. But it is just as obvious that our chemical composition (even if fully known) is not the whole story of man—or even of plant or animal. The dandelion is not just the seed or the shoot or the bud or the flower; it is all of these and much more besides. The delicate relationship between the

outer world (which extends into the farthermost reaches of space) and the inner world (which cannot be localized, since it involves the whole creature) is another order of questions. So is the hierarchy of forms, which expresses the living geometry of nature. Slowly, as we uncover one clue after another, we begin to document the theosophical view that the story of life extends below the threshold of sentience down into the preliving, and beyond man into the unexplored regions toward which he is growing. Everything that is being discovered today seems to reveal in fresh ways the complex interrelations between the individual and the whole cosmos—interrelations which are not merely stated, once and for all, in the testament of evolution, but which occur continuously in the dynamic interchange of life.

The impact of this view of life, new to modern science and which Teilhard de Chardin did so much to reinforce, is beginning to dissolve the narrow and constricted frames of reference in which man has been confined. However, this does not make some biochemists and psychologists hesitate for an instant to treat man as a mechanism. Whatever vindication of this method there may be lies in its practical results, which have been dramatic, especially in medicine. At the same time, those who believe that the true significance of man will never be grasped by such means have some constraints put upon their valid criticisms. An important principle is involved: If the unity and coherence of nature are a reality, then every significant discovery about the structure, the relationships and the characteristics of any

part of nature cannot fail in the long run to enrich our understanding of the whole.

There can never be any quarrel with the search for knowledge, only with a lopsided fixation upon one element to the exclusion of others. We are slowly learning that just as the vast ecology of nature embodies the most complex and delicate balancing of innumerable factors, so in every living organism, the dynamic wholeness which *is* the creature demands a perfect equilibrium of form and function. Every least thing is of supreme importance to the over-all harmony. Therefore, those who are concerned with protein molecules must see them as fundamental to life, not as life itself; those to whom the beauty and wonder of existence make first claim must similarly admit the important role of the subtle mechanisms which nature has evolved for the uses of life.

Adolph Portmann warns, in regard to living forms, that they "can be studied from many points of view, and it is essential that none is ignored and that no single one is prejudged to be more important or more 'scientific' than any of the others. Only the sum total of all its methods can provide an over-all view of a given generation's scientific outlook. The unity of natural sciences cannot be achieved by reducing biology to only those of its aspects that fit into physics and chemistry. Nature comprises every aspect of life—subjective experience no less than structure. Biologists ignore this fact at their peril."[1] Those of us who are repelled by the use of statistical and quantitative methods in areas where we feel they do not belong should also take Dr. Portmann's

warning to heart. Theosophists, who study everything from the point of view of an underlying unity, can never feel that science is intruding when it probes the areas once reserved to religion and philosophy. Science has the right, even the duty, to study all the phenomenal world. Even more imperatively, it is the duty of education to put the findings of science into the larger perspective which will relate them to the whole of man's experience—in which feeling, imagination, longing and aspiration play so important a part.

It is just here that we find the most serious dislocation in modern knowledge. Technology and the enormous complexification of society have not only resulted in the oft-noted division between the specialist and the layman; they have diminished the role of man. The global problems which confront us with a new crisis or a new disaster every day, to be assimilated with the morning coffee, are all larger than life. We find ourselves able to live under this constant tension because we push the problems to the periphery of our lives—they are not "our problems" in the sense that we can do anything about them. Rather, they belong to that gigantic and impersonal society into which our world has been transformed: a marvelous and intricate machine, but not one which is manipulated by us.

Isolation and alienation are what most individuals experience, to a greater or lesser degree, in such a huge, depersonalized world. And since this experience is painful, many of our most difficult personal and social dislocations are the result. Individuals resist such alienation

through vigorous efforts of involvement, such as protest meetings and sit-ins, civil rights activities and membership in the Peace Corps. Even the personal revolt against social mores, witnessed in long hair, peculiar dress, and the refusal to wash or to live according to middle-class standards, is essentially a personal statement, a determination to be oneself. In some such sense, even violence may be a cry of the self: if I can't make contact with another human being any other way I can always hit him, and through him, the rest of society.

The frantic and even frenetic quality of modern life is thus a search for personal identity and meaning—a search which is unsatisfied by the formalism of our churches and our institutions. The ferment which is sweeping through organized religion, through education and the arts is all part of this rebellion. The demand is for something real, personal and of existential value to the individual—a meaningful experience. No substitutes will be accepted.

II

THIS long preamble is an attempt to put into focus some of the background against which we must try to understand and evaluate the impact which the psychedelics—the mind-changing drugs—are having today, especially upon young people. Embedded in what Sorokin has called a sensate culture, accustomed from infancy to pushing buttons in order to satisfy their wants, it is no wonder that in their search for inner experience many young people easily

turn to external agents. If pills can cure a cold, regulate family size, and rid us of anxieties and tensions, why should they not be as effective in revealing new dimensions of the self? Widespread use of sedatives, tranquilizers and painkillers of all sorts has induced in the American public a kind of drug psychology: the attitude that all our disorders, psychological as well as physical, will eventually yield to physico-chemical treatment. Every doctor will acknowledge that healing is a function of the organism itself, and that medicines can only clear the decks for action. But the effective use of drugs for specific purposes has led us to ignore the imbalance they may create. We begin to believe that anything is possible and everything is pardonable, if the search leads to new techniques of control—whether it be of cancer or of emotive states. Biochemistry has thus reinforced the mechanical view of man. If our subjective experience can be changed by regulating our chemical processes, then we may believe as well that our inner worlds are merely derivative from the outer world.

Raised in such an atmosphere, young people become more than willing to experiment with their own psyches. In an age where even space is losing its mystery, the unknown world within offers a real challenge to the venturesome, and the possibility of a whole new range of experience. The dangers which may be encountered are a stimulus rather than a deterrent. Just the other day I had an hour's conversation with a young man who lives in New York City. He told me quite calmly that "everyone" either took LSD or smoked mari-

juana, and that he personally felt marijuana was to be preferred, since its effects were less disorienting. (He said also that he believed the sale of marijuana should be legalized, since it was no more dangerous or harmful than alcohol.)

In this dangerous and explosive situation, the need is for a broad educational program which can put the drugs into proper perspective. But for this it is necessary to see man as a whole, and that is something which modern knowledge has as yet been unable to do. Human beings will use and abuse, and be used and abused, until there is wide understanding of the relationship between their inner and outer worlds, and how both serve the self. It is apparent that the psychedelic drugs have an inhibiting effect upon the conscious mind, thereby liberating other levels within the psyche. If this can teach us something about the latent potential of man, it *may* in the long run be a gain. That is the best one can say at this stage.

So much has been written about the kind of experience which results from the ingestion of LSD that it need not be reviewed in detail. Suffice it to say, it may include: a heightening of sensory perception, so that the smallest sight or sound becomes overwhelmingly significant; a dissolution of the boundaries of the ego; a new orientation toward experience and therefore the possibility of achieving new meanings; an expansion of consciousness which may deliver feelings of unity with nature and with others, often identified as love or oneness with God and the cosmos. It is becoming increas-

ingly evident that the drug experience is like any other experience: its meaning lies within the person. Therefore what is released may be latent perceptions of beauty, affections too-long suppressed, and the kind of wonder experienced in childhood. On the other hand, fantasy may lead to fear, and sensations may be frightening, even horrible. Much depends upon set and setting, which should be carefully controlled. There is considerable evidence that psychedelics can be of therapeutic value in the treatment of alcoholism[2] and useful in schizophrenia.[3] The serious research that is being done by qualified physicians is contributing some new knowledge about the relationship between ego and personality, the symbolizing function, the creating and discovering of meanings. But the uncontrolled and casual use of the drug can have fearful and even fatal consequences. Those who have neurotic or psychotic tendencies may violently hallucinate. Some feel helplessly cut off, isolated in a shadowy world peopled by monsters, beset by fears, anxieties and even wild terrors, or seriously disoriented and lost.[4] The fact that hundreds, even thousands, of persons have easy access to LSD and similar drugs (which are easy to manufacture) naturally leads to the worst abuses. So we have the horrible case (reported in the New York *World Telegram* on April 6, 1966) of a five-year-old child admitted to Bellevue Hospital, whose frenzy and animal behavior were uncontrollable. She was diagnosed as having suffered severe and possibly permanent psychic damage—because she had gone to the family refrigerator, found and eaten a sugar cube soaked in LSD.

It had been put there by her eighteen-year-old uncle, who had obtained it in Greenwich Village from a street peddler.

Those who see in the drugs the means of obtaining new insights may deplore such incidents, but they are not deterred. They listen, rather, to those who report evidence that the drug experience can be genuinely religious or mystical. Aldous Huxley, for example, has gone so far as to say that drugs will change modern religion, making it an activity "concerned mainly with experience and intuition." He reasons that "to be shaken out of the ruts of ordinary perception, to be shown for a few timeless hours the outer and inner world . . . as they are apprehended, directly and unconditionally . . . this is an experience of inestimable value to everyone and especially to the intellectual."[5] Such statements by serious students of mysticism carry great weight. Therefore, one of the most important questions with regard to the drugs is whether the states of perception they induce are genuinely mystical. But this is a difficult question to answer with any finality, first because of the subjective nature of the evidence, and second because the classical literature on the subject, such as Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* and the writings of saints and religious teachers, includes such a wide range of experience as mystical.

There is little need to point out that the individual who starts out on his quest for realization needs help. Why else would mystics write of their experiences for the benefit of others, or gurus accept pupils for training? In the early stages, various aids are permitted.

Drugs have been used in many cultures in connection with religious rites and practices, and Patanjali himself mentions that they *may* be an alternative method for achievement of the initial stages.[6] These facts are offered as precedents for use of the drug today, a use which is defended as being no more "artificial" than church ritual, music, incense, chanting, prayer, yoga exercises, or even the contemplation of nature. It has certainly been emphasized by many teachers, such as Krishnamurti, that all such aids have their limitations and their dangers. Asrani points out, with regard to physiological exercises (which so many theosophical writers have condemned) that "there are indications that when the practicioner is unsuited for them, they are to be avoided." And he goes on to cite a less-noted danger: "Even devotional practices can tend to produce passivity and negativeness, while philosophical meditation can lead to intellectual self-complacency."[7] Devotion can harden into orthodoxy or degenerate into blind belief; philosophical thought can wither and grow dry, sterile and remote from life. The search for wholeness thus needs alertness and constant awareness. But it is just this kind of conscious control and support of the self that the drug-induced experience lacks. The discriminating mind is evaded.

Therefore one of the greatest objections to drug-taking (as to hypnotism) is that it weakens the all-too-tenuous grasp of the self of man upon the tumultuous and diverse elements of his personality. If self-transformation is to be the crown of our long evolutionary climb

toward responsible and full manhood, it must be an act of affirmation. The passivity which is an inevitable accompaniment of submission to a drug, no matter how well-intended, cannot but negate man's drive toward self-actualization. The outcome may not be compulsive dependence upon LSD, since it is not an addictive drug, but it will incline the practitioner to rely on external agents, rather than on his own innate ability to attain wholeness by and for himself. What is more, although the drug may yield new perceptions of the resources which lie within, the evidence so far presented does not convince me that the experience is truly a mystical revelation of the self. I believe, rather, that what the drugs do is inhibit the control of the conscious mind, allowing the psyche to take over.

UNDER the influence of LSD, the testimony indicates, a person is temporarily freed from the categories and symbolizations through which our experience is ordinarily presented to us. It is this which permits him to relinquish the overabstractions which our theoretically based culture imposes on its members. As a result, the world has a kind of freshness and spontaneity, as old familiar elements are recombined into new, imaginative and amusing patterns. Everything seems more vivid, alive, colorful, and intimate. Sights and impressions take on another dimension, gain depth. Fantasies seem real, for the actual and the imaginative are entwined. To put it differently, the feeling content of daily experience (which is always there, but disregarded or suppressed

through habit and repetition, save perhaps by artists) is released and savored. Ordinary perceptions are inhibited, and although memory is retained and even retrieved, its handling is non-logical. The rational principle is submerged, overwhelmed by the irrational, egoless condition; there is a feeling of "dematerialization," even of being transparent or invisible. When this dissolution of the ego is chaotic, the result may be psychosis, but when it is free of fear or anxiety, it may lead the individual away from stereotyped thinking and permit him to achieve creative solutions to life problems.

These are some of the more positive results of the psychedelic experience. When they are accompanied by a flood of joyous emotion and a feeling of empathy or oneness with the universe, they are identified as mystical states. Leary, for example, has stated that over half of those who experimented with LSD had a "transcendental experience." In an article on "The Religious Implications of the Consciousness-Changing Drugs," Joseph Havens directs our attention to the difficulties which lie in the way of proper assessment of the experience: "To take a psychedelic visionary experience as direct and unmediated insight into cosmic Truth, is, in the light of modern knowledge, inexcusably naive. But to interpret the vision as simply psycho-pathology, or cultural conditioning, or some combination of these, is inexcusably reductive . . . because . . . it falsely separates the experiencer from the cosmic matrix of his experience."[8]

This judgment seems to me very perceptive. Subjective experience is difficult to detach from

its context, not only because man is a partless whole, but also because he is inseparably one with all of nature. The atoms and molecules in his body are identical with those in every other bit of matter; the tides of life which flow through him rise and fall equally in all creatures; the consciousness which, focused in self-awareness permits the whole range of his thought, can be traced back through the living orders to its dawn in protoplasm itself. All this richness man shares with other creatures in the immediacy of psychic life, wherein there are no intellectual barriers. When our ego defenses fall and the inhibitions we impose upon the free flow of our feelings are removed, this psychic life is what we experience. It seems evident that the psychedelic drugs somehow expose that portion of the individual psyche which is in active resonance with the universal psyche—or what has been called the psychodynamic field. All living creatures participate in and are sustained by this life force field, which evokes from matter the ability to combine into new and more complex organisms, and helps to maintain the integrity of these forms through changing conditions. Man shares the ability of plants and animals to respond instinctively to the flood of sensory impressions and feelings which form the indeterminate, aesthetic background of life—but in him it is overlayed by conscious thought. Nonetheless, the constant, dynamic flow between organism and universe goes on. In fact, genuine health is a result of the smooth, harmonious functioning of all the unconscious elements of body and psyche;

nature sustains us, as it were, in spite of ourselves.

This psychic life, I believe, is uncovered and lit up by the action of the psychedelic drugs. The feelings of oneness come from the realization of the flow of universal life through us, which the focusing of self-consciousness in the ego ordinarily prevents. One who has never before had such an experience can quite naturally believe that the ensuing feelings of freedom, joy and participation are a spiritual revelation. However, genuine realization, though ineffable, has consequences which are indeed felt as emotion—but they can also be translated into knowledge and worked out in action. Spiritual union, although it may be accompanied by feelings of bliss and ecstasy, is much more than these oceanic emotive states. First and foremost is the centering in the self—the stillness, the sense of pure being and complete awareness which brings wholeness, equipoise, relinquishment, and peace. Having penetrated the ceaseless flux and change of personal life, the aspirant realizes that man's individual uniqueness is fulfilled in his fully conscious participation in eternal being, the All. Patanjali has characterized this indescribable condition as the "purity of non-deliberative being," (I, 47) or the "sorrowless condition of the mind, full of light," (I, 36), wherein the intellect is "truth-bearing, unconditioned by time." (I, 26) However difficult or even impossible it may be to grasp these meanings with the rational mind, it is evident that the enlightenment does by no means by-pass consciousness, but rather suffuses and transforms it. The result is an

integration of all elements of the self, a kind of limpid wholeness wherein inner conflict vanishes.

It should be apparent to all students of Theosophy and mysticism that the psychedelic experience is not a true "entrance." However, it may under certain conditions afford a glimpse of the possibility of such an entrance, and so a stimulus to the individual search. Proper study of the drugs may also have the effect of revealing what man has in common with the other orders of life, as well as what is unique to him. If, as Murphy and Cohen have said, the drug experience can prove "that there is a constant, dynamic interaction between the human organism and the universe," (what we have called the psychodynamic field) part of the problem of human existence will fall into better perspective.

Murphy and Cohen have made another point which deserves the most serious attention. "It is possible," they write, "that these biochemical and bioelectrical processes impinging upon cerebral structures may be isomorphic with the highest reaches of our aesthetic, religious or personal potential."[9] The idea that man is a microcosm, and that he literally embodies cosmic universals in the structure, organization and content of his whole nature, is an idea familiar to students of Eastern thought, but fresh and startling to the West. Application of modern scientific methods to such a metaphysical concept could lead to new insights into the nature of man.

The earth turns in space, the galaxies rush outward, and the evolutionary clock moves steadily forward. It is impossible, in our space-time world, to wipe away man's history or erase from his mind anything that he has learned. The psychedelic drugs are now part of common knowledge, and they will continue to pose a threat until we manage to turn them into an opportunity for deeper self-understanding. As we mentioned before, all techniques for penetrating man's inner worlds have their difficulties and dangers. One can imagine that when yoga practices were first introduced centuries ago they may have been regarded with dismay and horror. In his search for understanding, the mind of man will continue to develop new methods for studying the world around him and his own nature. As Portmann says, "Technical thought is a human characteristic, and only our inventions enable us to grasp the true significance of nature's technical forms."[10] Man's psyche is one of nature's finest technical forms—an instrument sensitive to the needs of life, but also infinitely responsive to the directives of a higher principle, the intuitive mind. Occultism has long studied it as such. If modern science becomes humanized, as it shows some signs of doing, it may be able to develop appropriate twentieth century techniques for channeling psychic energy in ways beneficial to the individual and to society.

At this stage in his evolution, man's power and potential are most significantly focused in the dynamism of psycho-physical life, which is also the playground of cosmic forces. Be-

cause of this, his greatest sins of ignorance come from the misuse of these powers. Equally because of this, his enlightenment is possible here and now. With all the new knowledge that has been developed, the plight of human beings today wrings the heart. If we are to use our new knowledge and our new techniques truly to better the human condition, we must begin to learn something about the relationship of the outer world to the immensely rich inner life of man.

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